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The Swedes in Illinois – A Centennial

Nils William Olsson

The centennial of the appearance in Chicago in 1880 of Eric Johnson's and C. F. Peterson's *Svenskarne i Illinois (The Swedes in Illinois)* has gone virtually unnoticed and yet the publication of this pioneer work by two Swedish immigrant journalists, nine years after the disastrous Chicago Fire of 1871, was a feat of such magnitude that it remains to this day a standard reference work on the early Swedes in Illinois. Moreover, the almost 1,000 biographies to be found in the volume constitute one of the best genealogical sources for those Americans of Swedish descent who can trace their family story back a hundred years ago to the Prairie State.

Johnson and Peterson were not historians, but primarily journalists working in the midst of their countrymen, editing their Swedish newspapers, which circulated throughout the Swedish settlements in northwestern Illinois as well as in Chicago. They were thus in an excellent position to know the people they saw daily, in their interviews, in their editorial offices, and while mingling with Swedes wherever they congregated. They were thus able to get the immigrants' stories first-hand, to learn of their origin in Sweden, of their arduous journey across the ocean and their subsequent movement to the Middle West in search of a new existence.

It is tempting a hundred years later to criticize the authors' lack of historical acumen, the absence of source references in their work, the missing bibliography and the non-existence of an index. We must keep in mind, however, that Johnson and Peterson were self-taught journalists, who went about their task of recording the fates of their fellow countrymen because they had a consummate fear that unless they did so, the memories of these early days would be lost forever. The authors stress this fact in the foreword of their book, when they state that:

“No one will deny the desirability of having at our disposal a chronicle depicting the first appearance in this state of our own nationality. Because of this and also because it is already quite difficult to rescue from oblivion the memories we value and hold dear, it is therefore not too soon — to attempt this task.”

What do we know concerning the co-authors? Very little, indeed, beyond the brief biographical accounts in the standard Swedish reference works.

Eric Johnson was the son of the well-known Erik Jansson, founder and

leader of the Erik Jansson movement in Sweden, which ultimately was responsible for the emigration to the prairies of Illinois of more than 1,500 Swedes, mostly to the communalistic colony of Bishop Hill in Henry County. Eric Johnson was born in Österunda Parish, Västmanland *län* July 15, 1838 and was thus eight years old when in 1846 he accompanied his family to America. On the long journey from New York to Illinois he received his first instruction in English from Sophia Pollock, an Erik Jansson follower. She was born in Göteborg, but had spent a number of years in New York and had married an American, who operated a school, had educated Sophia and had given her an assistantship in the school. She came under the sway of Erik Jansson and followed him to Bishop Hill with her unwilling husband. When he died she married Erik Jansson, who in the meantime had become a widower. Thus she became Eric's stepmother. There is little doubt that the English instruction Eric received from Sophia Pollock was of great help to him in his later journalistic career.

Eric Johnson had one more year of schooling in the colony school in 1856, after which he worked in the colony store and helped work the family farm. In 1861 he volunteered for service in the Union Army and joined the "Swedish" Company D of the 57th Illinois Volunteer Regiment. He was quickly promoted to lieutenant and in September of 1862 he was made captain, a title he retained to his dying days. A health problem developed and at the urging of the army surgeons he resigned his commission and sought a healthier climate. He now began a career which interspersed newspaper publishing with merchandising. He bought, edited and sold in quick succession *The Galva Union* of Galva, IL and *The Altona Mirror* of Altona, IL. In the meantime he also acquired *The Galva Republican*. In 1869 he founded *The Illinois Swede*, which in 1870 was renamed *Nya Verlden*. When the latter newspaper was moved to Chicago in 1871, he divested himself of his share and remained in Galva. During the same year he also sold *The Galva Republican*, severing his connection with the newspaper publishing business for a time. He tried his hand at merchandising, politics and selling real estate in Kansas. All of these ventures failed and he returned to Illinois, settling in Nekoma in 1876. Once more he entered merchandising, only to once more fail. It was at this stage that he joined Peterson in a new project, aimed at telling the story of the Swedes in Illinois.

After the appearance of this work in the following year, he returned to newspaper publishing, starting *The Swedish Citizen* in Galva November 26, 1880, but relinquished it two years later. During the next few years he served as a state legislator in Nebraska, spent a few years in Washington, DC, working for the War Department, and finally went to Texas to sell real estate. From 1896 to 1906 he published *The Wahoo Era* in Wahoo, NE. In 1906 he began his last journalistic venture, the publication of *The Viking*, devoted to American Scandinavian life and culture. As so many of Johnson's ventures, it also floundered after but a few months. Johnson then moved to California and from there back to Omaha, NE, where he died May 18, 1919.

Carl Fredrik Petter Peterson, the co-author, was born in Fittja in the Parish of Botkyrka, Stockholm *län* April 16, 1843 and was thus Eric Johnson's junior by five years. He was eighteen years old when he emigrated to America in 1861 and immediately volunteered his services in the Union cause. His nearsightedness kept him out of the Army and he began a career of various jobs — working as a deck hand on a Mississippi steamer running between Saint Louis and New Orleans, as a section hand on the railroad, as a wood-cutter, a farm laborer and factory hand. In the meanwhile he used every opportunity to improve himself.

In 1870 he became editor of *Minnesota Tidning* in Saint Paul, MN, a job which lasted but four months. His experience, though, gave him the opportunity in Galva, IL, where he met and became co-editor with Eric Johnson of *The Illinois Swede* in the fall of 1870. He stayed to see the name changed to *Nya Verlden*, and co-edited the newspaper together with Johnson until January 20, 1871, when the paper and Peterson moved to Chicago. Johnson, in the meanwhile, remained in Galva.

He was to remain in Chicago for the remainder of his life, staying with *Nya Verlden* until 1877, when it merged with *Nya Svenska Amerikanaren* to become *Svenska Tribunen*. Peterson stayed on as chief editor until 1880, and as assistant editor until 1884, when he bought a fourth share of *Svenska Amerikanaren* and joined its staff. Here he stayed until 1888. In 1888–1889 he was the editor of *Svea* and in 1890–1891 of *Aftonbladet Skandia*, both published in Chicago. In 1901 he assumed the editorship in Chicago of *Nationaltidningen*, but remained at this post only a few months. He died in Chicago June 11, 1901.

During the last fifteen years of his life Peterson devoted much of his time to writing historical and cultural articles. In 1885 he brought out *Förenta Staternas historia (The History of the United States)*, translated both into Finnish and Norwegian and used for many years in Scandinavian immigrant circles. In 1890 he published *Amerikanska vältalare (American Orators)*; in 1891 *Republiken och dess institutioner (The Republic and its Institutions)* and finally in 1898 *Sverige i Amerika (Sweden in America)*.

A comparison of the two men responsible for *Svenskarne i Illinois* is quite difficult due to the lack of contemporary records. Johnson seems to have been an impetuous character with little staying power. He was the most prolific Swedish newspaper publisher in America, having started or published more than a half score of them. Except for his co-editorship with Peterson, we have very little evidence of his ability as a writer except for the material contained in his newspapers. Peterson, on the other hand, was an extremely gifted writer, who if he had enjoyed a formal education, would have gone very far.

This brings us to attempting to analyze who was responsible for what in the team effort that produced *Svenskarne i Illinois*. We know that Peterson, living in Chicago, must have been the man at the headquarters. His newspaper was published by Wahlfrid Williamson, a Swedish printer from Trelleborg, Sweden, who had arrived in America at the age of 19, and who, through ambition and hard work, had managed in two short years to become foreman at *Nya Verlden's*

printing plant. Four years later he bought the plant which then became the W. Williamson Printing Company, located at 1-3 North Clark Street.

It was no accident, therefore, that Williamson became the publisher of Johnson's and Peterson's work. Peterson was in the shop daily, editing his newspaper, and could thus tend to the editing, proofreading and make-up of the volume in question.

Johnson, on the other hand, seems to have been the field man, living as he did in Nekoma. His close family ties with Bishop Hill and his long associations with Galva, Altona and the neighboring Swedish settlements had given him valuable connections which he used very well to create his part of the story.

Certainly Johnson wrote the chapters on the history of the Bishop Hill colony and its leaders. This material was quite familiar to him and throughout this chapter one senses a certain sympathy for the colony and its leader. This was home territory to him.

Peterson, however, having lived in Chicago for almost ten years, was probably responsible for the material dealing with this city and its many Swedes — more than 25% of the biographies hail from Chicago.

That Peterson seems to have had the final say in deciding on the contents of the book is best proved by the fact that while Johnson's picture is one of nineteen in the work and his biography consumes more than a full page, Peterson's picture, as well as biography, are missing.

Whether Peterson had access to written sources, living as he did in Chicago, is uncertain. Both authors disclaim their dependence on such materials and claim in their foreword that they had no help:

“from the tiniest written source, but we have had to make personal visits to hundreds of our compatriots, from whose memories we have had to extricate information concerning the earliest phases of the settlements.”

Svenskarne i Illinois contains a rich and rewarding lode of genealogical information. The first part of the work dealing with the settlements themselves bristles with facts and information concerning the early settlers and their families. Here we learn of their origin, their time of arrival, their pioneer experiences and their family ties. The second part of the book is biographical, containing almost a thousand biographies of Swedes who arrived in the Middle West before 1880 and who were then still living. These biographies are loaded with genealogical data. For the greater part of them, all but thirty, the authors have been able to cite the city or parish of birth in Sweden as well as the birth date. There follow short resumés of their activities before and after emigrating. In most cases the marriages are noted, the name of the spouse, and where he or she hailed from in Sweden, sometimes the date of birth and occasionally information concerning children. For Americans whose roots go back a hundred years or more and who can follow their lines back to the Swedish settlements in Illinois, this amazing work can be very helpful.

In order to show the breadth and extensiveness of these biographies, they are here listed by city, county and township:

<i>Cities</i>			<i>Cities</i>		
Chicago		242	Monmouth		8
Elgin		15	Paxton		22
Galesburg		60	Princeton		31
Geneva		7	Rantoul		3
Kewanee		2	Rockford		74
Knoxville		10	Rock Island		16
Moline		54	Sycamore		10
 <i>Counties</i>			 <i>Counties</i>		
Bureau	Wyanet Township	7	Iroquois	Beaver Township	18
Fulton	Union "	2		Sheldon "	1
Henry	Andover "	46	Knox	Lynn "	1
	Cambridge "	16		Nekoma "	1
	Clover "	8		Ontario "	2
	Galva "	45		Sparta "	12
	Geneseo "	11		Victoria and Copley	21
	Lynn "	28		Walnut Grove "	10
	Munson "	2	Mercer	Mercer "	6
	Osco "	14		New Boston "	2
	Oxford "	9		New Windsor "	13
	Weller "	86	Stark	Toulon "	2
	Western "	30	Miscel-	Illinois Swedes "	
	Wethersfield "	1	aneous	residing in Nebraska	7

Excellent as *Svenskarne i Illinois* is as a genealogical source, containing information concerning thousands of early Swedes in Illinois, the work should be used with extreme care. Again it should be kept in mind that Johnson and Peterson were journalists — they did not pretend to be historians. They have told us that they did not use written sources, that they instead visited hundreds of their fellow countrymen to gather the information contained in their work. They must have anticipated criticism for they say in their foreword that:

“We have conscientiously sought to check the information we received and we know that the older countrymen whom we have mentioned are in agreement that we have not written down our information at random.”

Be that as it may, there were often “slips between the cup and the lip”. Errors due to poor aural comprehension and errors while copying down the information abound, and even though the interviewers may have written down the information received correctly, much could have happened as the material wandered from the typesetter to the proofreader to the make-ready and to the final product. Aural misconceptions predominate, in which the interviewer has

not grasped fully the statement given by the person interviewed. We find such errors as the following, with the Swedish *län* given in parentheses: Frysända for Frysände (Värmland); Kristala and Krigsdala for Kristdala (Kalmar); Österlunda for Österunda (Västmanland); Jerrbro for Järbo (Gävleborg); Färla for Färlöv (Kristianstad); Vasarum for Virserum (Kalmar); Munkaljunga for Munkaljungby (Kristianstad); Ocker for Åker (Jönköping); Östra Karp for Östra Karup (Halland); Gersäter for Gesäter (Älvsborg); Grusmark for Gräsmark (Värmland); Östra Görge for Östra Göinge (Kristianstad); Härsveda for Hästveda (Kristianstad); Andershöstra for Angerdshestra (Jönköping); Stimblehult for Stenbrohult (Kronoberg); Boviken for Oviken (Jämtland); Omuts bruk for Åmotsbruk (Gävleborg); and Örken for Örkened (Kristianstad).

Some of the scribal errors are quite obvious and were not caught by the proofreader. Some of these are as follows: Firserum for Tirserum (today Tiderstrum in Östergötland); Sonneberga for Lönneberga (Kalmar); Sannaskede for Lannaskede (Jönköping); Sormestorp for Tormestorp (in Brönnestad Parish, Malmöhus) and Sällaryd for Gällaryd (Jönköping).

These examples are cited to demonstrate how the researcher must be on guard as he analyzes the biographical and genealogical information. We all know that the most important link across the ocean is the knowledge of the precise parish from which one's ancestor comes. With care *Svenskarne i Illinois* can become a useful genealogical tool. It should be added that not all of the place names can be deciphered. There are some garbles that frustrate and stump the most ambitious researcher, but these are in the minority.

On balance we should be grateful to the two Swedish journalists who came upon the idea a hundred years ago to give us this study of the early Swedish settlements in Illinois and the people who settled there.

It is unfortunate that *Svenskarne i Illinois* has not been translated into English. Portions of it are well worth it. In the meanwhile any scholar with a minimum Swedish vocabulary and armed with a good Swedish-English dictionary should have little trouble penetrating the genealogical information in this worthwhile study.

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